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In response to “Normalization of plus size and the danger of unseen overweight and obesity in England”

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In the July edition of *Obesity*, Mutturak wrote that the normalisation of overweight and obesity leads to the underestimation of overweight and obesity (1). This data is based on self-perceptions of weight across an 18-year period. However, the article opens by discussing plus size clothing and its apparent contribution to the normalisation of overweight and obesity. The author also remarks that plus size clothes retailers may have contributed to the normalisation of overweight and obesity stigma, again an unevidenced claim that is not relevant to the study findings. This claim though is what made the media headlines.

The multi-modal dissemination of study findings is an essential part of the research cycle. Published studies often have a complementary press release that present the main points in lay terms. Mutturak's article is no different (2). The gravitas of a press release should not be taken lightly. Via university press teams, they are sent to media outlets in hope that study findings will be shared far and wide. Press releases should therefore be clear, pertinent and timely to gain media attention. However, in Mutturak's press release (2), the opening points - and indeed the quotes from the author - are not supported by the study findings, nor were they explored in the study.

For years, people with overweight and obesity have been unable to purchase appropriately sized clothing. Appropriately sized clothes for people of all shapes and sizes should not be frowned upon. This reflects the body diversity seen in our society and it is a human right to be able to purchase clothes that fit. Retail companies, like any other industry, respond to consumer demand and thus, understandably, provide more plus size clothing in response to increasing overweight and obesity. Members of a UK-based charity - Helping Overcome Obesity Problems (HOOP) - dispute the author's claims. Sarah Le Brocq, Director of HOOP, says, "our members are very aware that they have overweight or obesity. Being able to purchase clothes that fit has not made them think their weight is 'normal'. We have a right to purchase clothes that fit, and the increase in plus size clothing has been received positively by HOOP members".

Stigmatising and inaccurate media portrayals of obesity are suggested to influence public attitudes towards people with obesity (3). Whilst media reports of this article are indeed stigmatising, Mutturak's article (1), and subsequent press release (2), also disseminates unevidenced claims to the public about plus size clothes brands. Many media reports of this article focused on the blame that the author attached to plus size clothing brands, rather than the study findings...

"Normalisation of 'plus-size' may undermine the efforts to tackle obesity" - Business Standard

"Body-positive movement causes people to think they aren't obese, study says" - News Week

Within a month, this article achieved an Altmetric score of 541 (top 5%), with more than 60 media outlets publishing a story based on it. These news stories stir public debate via wide-scale sharing of sensationalist headlines on social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter, further spreading the inaccurate portrayals of obesity

As researchers, we have an obligation to report research objectively, and to ensure messages offered to the media via press releases are substantiated by results. Like the media, researchers must avoid unevidenced claims that can compound already troublesome issues – in this instance, the inaccurate public perceptions about the normalisation of obesity, and, potentially worsening weight stigma and discrimination.

References

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